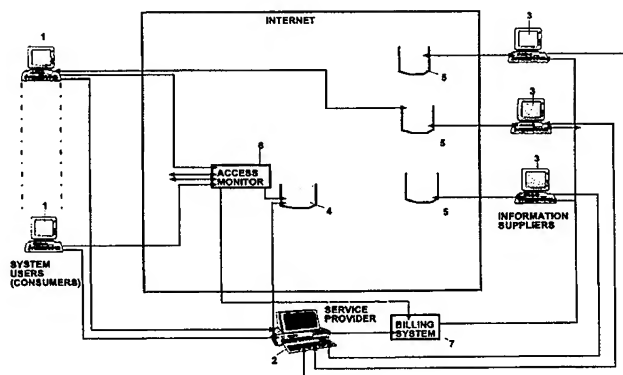




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(54) Title: IMPROVEMENTS IN, OR RELATING TO, SYSTEMS FOR COLLECTING AND DISTRIBUTING INFORMATION



(57) Abstract

A system, and method, for collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, and, in particular, a system and method for providing a customer care service (CCS) to system users, in which information on a company offering products and/or services for sale, using the Internet, is distributed to system users (consumers), on request, and in which the distributed information is based on information, collected from system users, relating to those of the selling companies from whom products and/or services have been obtained by the system users. The collected information relates to each system user's trading experiences with the selling companies and facilitates the provision of a customer care service to system users. The customer care service is offered by a CCS operator in collaboration with the selling companies, and enables a selling company to represent itself as a reliable and responsible supplier through use of statistics from actual customers' experiences of the company. Since all the advertising is handled by an independent third party company, the customer care service gives a selling company the opportunity to advertise itself as a reliable and responsible supplier, on the basis of statistics derived from actual customers' experiences of the company.

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**IMPROVEMENTS IN, OR RELATING TO, SYSTEMS FOR COLLECTING
AND DISTRIBUTING INFORMATION**

5 The invention relates to a system for, and a method of, collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, and, in particular, to a system and method for providing a customer care service.

10 The present invention is of general applicability to collecting and distributing information, over an electronic medium, such as the Internet. The invention will, however, be described in the particular context of a system for distributing information on a company offering products and/or services for sale to system users, using the Internet, in which the distributed information
15 is based on information, collected from system users, relating to those of the selling companies from whom products and/or services have been obtained by the system users. In other words, the collected information relates to each system user's trading experiences with the selling companies and facilitates the provision of a customer care service to system users.

20 Electronic trading on the Internet is a global phenomenon where the customer does not always have information concerning the companies that are offering their services and/or products on the Internet. A customer may, therefore, be uncertain about trading with a company because he/she will
25 have no guarantees that the company will be able to live up to the promises mirrored by its advertisements.

 In practice, an Internet user can relatively easily obtain information concerning which companies are selling a particular product, or service,
30 which the user is seeking to purchase, at the best possible price, by using, for example, a powerful search machine, such as Alta Vista. However, the

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identification of a possible supplier, or suppliers, using this method, does not give the Internet user any information concerning the supplier(s), i.e. a supplier's reputation, ability to supply a product/service on time, quality of products/services provided, after sales service, etc.. In other words, the Internet user, i.e. potential customer, will not, as stated above, know, with any certainty, whether the company will actually live up to the promises made in its advertisements. In many cases, a possible supplier may be a well-known company having a good reputation in the countries of origin of some Internet users, but may be totally unknown to most consumers in other countries. This problem is one of the main reasons why electronic trading on the Internet has not developed as quickly as was originally expected by Internet suppliers, traders and users.

Known commercial services are adapted to provide credit information on companies, but there are no currently available automated services which offer consumers objectively collected statistics on how particular companies treat their customers, and/or whether, or not, such companies fulfil promises made in advertisements, or the like.

It is an object of the present invention to provide a system for, and a method of, collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, and, in particular, a system and method for providing a customer care service. The customer care service enables a company, selling products and/or services via an electronic medium, for example, the Internet, to represent itself as a reliable and responsible supplier through use of statistics from actual customers' experiences of the company. The customer care service (CCS) gives rise to a trusting relationship between the CCS provider and Internet users (customers) that is completely different from the relationship established by smooth-sounding advertisements made by the selling companies themselves. Thus, the present invention will give a selling

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company the opportunity to advertise itself as a reliable and responsible supplier, on the basis of statistics derived from actual customers' experiences of the company.

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According to a first aspect of the present invention, there is provide, a system for collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, said system including, for connection to said electronic medium, a plurality of system user terminals, a service provider's file server, and a plurality of information provider's file servers, characterised in that said service provider's file server includes information collection and distribution means for collecting information from said plurality of information providers concerning services and/or information offered to system users, and system users relating to those of said plurality of information providers from whom services and/or information have been obtained by said system users; and collating collected information on an information provider and distributing information, based on said collated information, to system users, on request.

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The system may be adapted to establish a data link between said service provider's file server and each of said plurality of information providers, and the data link may be provided over said electronic medium.

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The information collection and distribution means may be adapted to automatically obtain, from said plurality of information providers, information concerning all aspects of the services and/or information provided to a system user, using said data link. Information collected from said plurality of information providers may include data relating to the nature of the services and/or information provided to system users, and the system user's e-mail address.

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The plurality of system user terminals may each include a display screen, and the information collection and distribution means may include presentation means for automatically indicating on the display screen of a system user's terminal, each time the system user accesses an information provider's file server, that information concerning other system users' dealings with said information provider can be obtained from the service provider. The presentation means may be adapted, when giving said automatic indication, to request the system user to indicate, by actuating a soft key displayed on said display screen, whether the system user is prepared to supply information to said service provider concerning the system user's dealings with said information provider. The information collection and distribution means may include enquiry means for automatically sending enquiries to randomly selected system users who have actuated said soft key; data collation means for collating information received from system users, in response to said enquiries, and using the collated information to formulate information on said information providers for distribution to system users; and distribution means for distributing said information to system users with a parametrically controlled delay. The distribution means may be adapted to make updates of said information available to system users every third hour.

The information obtained from said information providers may include details of all complaints received from system users, and said information collection and distribution means may include data comparison means for comparing said information provider's complaints information with complaints information received from system users. The comparison means may be adapted to compare said information provider's complaints information with complaints information obtained from third party consumer protection organisations. In the event that an information provider has failed to supply relevant information to said service provider, said information collection and

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distribution means may be adapted to automatically cease collecting information from that information provider; and supplying information on that information provider to system users.

5 The information collection and distribution means may be adapted to automatically display an icon on the display screen of a system user's terminal, when said system user accesses an information provider's file server, said icon being a soft key for actuation by the system user when information concerning other system users' dealings with the information
10 provider is required from said information provider. The information collection and distribution means may be adapted, when said soft key icon is actuated by a system user, to automatically present, on the display screen of the system user's terminal, a graphic diagram of said information concerning other system users' dealings with the information provider. The information
15 provider may be a company offering products and/or services for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, and the information presented by said graphic diagram may include sales volumes for the selling company, together with a relative assessment of said other system user's comments concerning their dealings with said selling company, and whether
20 said selling company satisfied promises made in advertising and/or other promotional literature for the products and/or services offered to system users. The information presented by said graphic diagram may further include information concerning the manner in which system user complaints have been handled by the selling company. The relative assessment may
25 relate, inter alia, to whether a final date for delivery of a product, or service, product functionality, product quality, product reliability, and after sales services, are consistent with that which was promised in said advertising and/or other promotional literature, at the time of purchase by system users.

30 The electronic medium may be the Internet, the service provider and

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the information providers may each have a WWW site located on a respective file server, and the information provider's WWW sites may be accessible to system users wishing to acquire services and/or information from said information providers. Each system user terminal may include a personal computer (PC), a modulator/demodulator (Modem) for connecting said PC to the Internet, and an Internet software package.

The system may include a billing system for charging said information providers for the supply of said information on information providers to system users, said charges being made in dependence upon the use made of said information supply service by system users.

The system may include an access monitor for monitoring access, by system users, to said information supply service, and informing said billing means each time said information supply service is accessed for an information provider; and said billing system may be adapted, on receipt of information from said access monitor, to debit the information provider's account and credit the services provider's account, with an agreed monetary charge. The charges levied may be successively reduced, as the access frequency increases, and, after a predetermined maximum number of accesses has been made, within a specified period of time, no further charge may be levied for additional accesses within said specified period of time.

Each of said information providers may be a company offering services and/or products for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, said information collection and distribution means may be adapted to automatically offer a customer care service (CCS) to a system users, said CCS being electronically accessible to a system user, at the time of making a purchase, by way of the display screen of the system user's terminal, and said CCS may be adapted, when accessed by a system user, to provide

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information on a selling company, said information being based on other system user's trading experiences with that selling company. Said customer care service (CCS) may be offered by said service provider in collaboration with said selling companies.

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According to a second aspect of the present invention, there is provided, in a system for collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, in which said system includes, for connection to said electronic medium, a plurality of system user terminals, a service provider's file server, and a plurality of information provider's file servers, a method for collecting and distributing information characterised by collecting information from said plurality of information providers concerning services and/or information offered to system users, and system users relating to those of said plurality of information providers from whom services and/or information have been obtained by said system users; and collating collected information on an information provider and distributing information, based on said collated information, to system users, on request. This method may be further characterised by establishing a data link between said service provider's file server and each of said plurality of information providers. This method may be further characterised by automatically obtaining, from said plurality of information providers, information concerning all aspects of the services and/or information provided to a system user, using said data link. This method may be further characterised in that information collected from said plurality of information providers includes data relating to the nature of the services and/or information provided to system users, and the system user's e-mail address. This method may be further characterised in that said data link is provided over said electronic medium.

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The method may be characterised by automatically indicating on a display screen of a system user's terminal, each time the system user

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accesses an information provider's file server, that information concerning other system users' dealings with said information provider can be obtained from the service provider. This method may be further characterised by requesting said system user to actuate a soft key displayed on said display screen to indicate said system user's willingness to supply information to said service provider concerning said system user's dealings with said information provider. This method may be further characterised by automatically sending enquiries to randomly selected system users who have actuated said soft key; collating information received from system users, in response to said enquiries; using the collated information to formulate information on said information providers for distribution to system users; and distributing said information to system users with a parametrically controlled delay. This method may be further characterised by making updates of said information available to system users every third hour.

The method may be characterised in that said information obtained from said plurality of information providers includes details of all complaints received from system users, and in that said information collection and distribution means include data comparison means for comparing said information provider's complaints information with complaints information received from system users. This method may be further characterised by comparing said information provider's complaints information with complaints information obtained from third party consumer protection organisations. This method may be further characterised in that, in the event that an information provider has failed to supply relevant information to said service provider, said method includes the steps of automatically ceasing the collection of information from that information provider; and supply of information on that information provider to system users.

The method may be characterised by automatically displaying a soft

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key, in the form of an icon, on the display screen of a system user's terminal, when said system user accesses an information provider's file server; and said system user actuating said soft key icon, when information concerning other system users' dealings with the information provider, is required from said information provider. This method may be further characterised by automatically presenting, on the display screen of the system user's terminal, a graphic diagram of said information concerning other system users' dealings with the information provider, when said soft key icon is actuated by a system user. This method may be further characterised in that said information provider is a company offering products and/or services for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, and in that the information presented by said graphic diagram includes sales volumes for the selling company, together with a relative assessment of said other system user's comments concerning their dealings with said selling company, and whether said selling company satisfied promises made in advertising and/or other promotional literature for the products and/or services offered to system users. This method may be further characterised in that the information presented by said graphic diagram further includes information concerning the manner in which system user complaints have been handled by the selling company. This method may be further characterised in that said relative assessment relates, inter alia, to whether a final date for delivery of a product, or service, product functionality, product quality, product reliability, and after sales services, are consistent with that which was promised in said advertising and/or other promotional literature, at the time of purchase by system users.

The method may be characterised in that said electronic medium is the Internet. This method may be further characterised in that said service provider and said information providers each have a WWW site located on a respective file server, and in that said information provider's WWW sites are

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accessible to system users wishing to acquire services and/or information from said information providers. This method may be further characterised in that each system user terminal includes a personal computer (PC), a modulator/demodulator (Modem) for connecting said PC to the Internet, and an Internet software package.

The method may be characterised by charging said information providers for the supply of said information on information providers to system users, said charges being made in dependence upon the use made of said information supply service by system users. This method may be further characterised by monitoring access, by system users, to said information supply service; informing said billing means each time said information supply service is accessed for an information provider; and, on receipt of information from said access monitor, debiting the information provider's account and credit the services provider's account, with an agreed monetary charge. This method may be further characterised by successively reducing the levied charges, as the access frequency increases, and after a predetermined maximum number of accesses has been made, within a specified period of time, making no further charge for additional accesses made within said specified period of time.

The method may be characterised in that each of said information providers is a company offering services and/or products for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, and in that said method includes the steps of automatically offering a customer care service (CCS) to a system user, at the time of making a purchase, by way of the display screen of the system user's terminal, and, when said CCS is accessed by a system user, automatically providing information on a selling company, said information being based on other system user's trading experiences with that selling company. This method may be further characterised in that said

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customer care service (CCS) is offered by said service provider in collaboration with said selling companies.

5 The foregoing and other features of the present invention will be better understood from the following description with reference to the accompanying drawing, in which:

10 Figure 1 diagrammatically illustrates, in the form of a block diagram, a system, according to the present invention, for collecting and distributing information.

15 It will be seen from the subsequent description that the present invention is adapted for use in respect of all types of electronic media transactions, for example, the offer and sale of products and/or services, and, in particularly, those made using the Internet. It will, however, be directly evident to persons skilled in the art that the present invention is suitable for use in connection with transactions made via other electronic systems, for example, interactive television, or the like.

20 As is diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 1 of the accompanying drawings, the system according to the present invention, for collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, includes a plurality of system user terminals 1, a service provider's terminal 2, and a plurality of information provider's terminals 3. The service provider has
25 a World Wide Web (WWW) site located on a file server 4, and each of the information providers have an Internet WWW site located on one of the file servers 5. Whilst only three information providers are shown in Figure 1, it will be readily understood by persons skilled in the art that, in practice, the number of information providers 3 will be much larger than this and that the
30 number of information providers will, to some extent, be dependent upon

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system users' demands/needs for services and/or information. In practice, a data link, provided over the Internet, is established between the service provider's file server 4 and each of the information providers 3.

5 The system user terminals 1 will, in practice, each include a personal computer (PC) having a display screen, an Internet software package, and a modulator/demodulator (modem) for connecting the PC to the Internet in order to gain access to the WWW sites. The manner in which this is effected is well known to persons skilled in the art and will not, therefore, be further
10 elaborated in this patent specification.

 It will be seen from the subsequent description that, in its broadest aspects, the system of Figure 1 is adapted to collect information and distribute information relating to the information providers 3 and system
15 user's experiences in dealing with the information providers 3. In particular, the service provider will collect information from the information providers 3 concerning the services, and/or information, which they are currently offering to system users via the Internet. In addition, the service provider collects
20 information from system users relating to those of the information providers from whom they have obtained services and/or information. In practice, the information collected from system users relates to their dealings with the information providers 3, for example, their experiences in dealing with the information providers 3 for the supply of services, information, or products.

25 The information collected in respect of each information provider 3 is collated by the service provider, and statistical data, based on the collated information, is distributed, via the service provider's file server 4, to system users, on request, i.e. when a system user is contemplating making contact with an information provider 3, via the information provider's file server 5, in
30 respect of the offered services, information, or products.

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As illustrated in Figure 1, the system of the present invention includes a billing system 7 for charging the information providers 3 for the distribution of information, relating to the information providers 3, to system users. In practice, the charges for this service are levied in dependence upon the use
5 made of the information supply service by system users. An access monitor 6, the inputs of which are each connected, via the Internet, to an output of a separate one of the system user terminals 1, is used for monitoring access, by system users, to the service provider's file server 4 for the supply of information relating to an information provider 3. Thus, each time the
10 information supply service is accessed, in respect of an information provider 3, the access monitor 6 informs the billing system 7. In response to receipt of this information, the billing system debits the information provider's account and credits the services provider's account, with an agreed monetary charge for the provision of the service.

As stated above, a particular application of the system of the present invention is the provision of a customer care service (CCS) to system users (consumers) wishing to purchase products and/or services from companies who have advertised their products and/or services for sale on the Internet.
20 Thus, for this application, the system is primarily a consumer products/services information supply system to enable consumers (system users) to be better informed about a company from whom they intend to purchase a product, or service.

The system of the present invention includes means for automatically offering the customer care service (CCS) to a consumer (system user) in a manner to be subsequently outlined. The CCS is electronically accessible to a consumer (system user), at the time of making a purchase, by way of the display screen of the system user's PC. When accessed by a consumer, the
30 customer care service automatically provides an indication on the display

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screen of the consumer's PC that information concerning other consumers' dealings, i.e. trading experiences, with that selling company can be obtained from the service provider 2, i.e. CCS operator.

5 In practice, the customer care service (CCS) is offered by the CCS operator (service provider 2) in collaboration with each of the selling companies (information providers 3), i.e. an agreement is established between the CCS operator and each of the selling companies for the provision of the service. In essence, the agreement between the selling
10 companies and an independent third party company, i.e. CCS operator, will give rise to a trusting relationship between the CCS operator and consumers (system users) that is completely different from the relationship established by smooth-sounding advertisements made by the selling companies themselves. Thus, the customer care service will give a selling company the
15 opportunity to advertise itself as a reliable and responsible supplier, on the basis of statistics derived from actual customers' experiences of the company.

20 The information collected by the CCS service relates to all purchases made using the electronic trade facilities of the Internet, i.e. in the electronic shop. In particular, the information collected by the CCS service includes the monetary sum paid by a system user (consumer) for the purchased product, or service, and the consumer's e-mail address. This information is, in practice, automatically sent to the CCS operator using the data link
25 established between the CCS operator (service provider 2) and each of the selling companies (information providers 3).

30 Thus, a company selling products and/or services on the Internet enters into an agreement with the independent third party company operating the customer care service (CCS). which is such that the company sends the

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CCS operator information concerning all purchases made by its customers (system users) using the Internet, i.e. using the electronic shopping facilities provided by the Internet. As stated above, the information supplied to the CCS operator includes details of the purchase price and the customer's e-mail address.

In practice, each time a consumer (system user) enters a selling company's WWW site, in a manner well known to persons skilled in the art, using his/her PC, the CCS service is adapted to automatically display a CCS icon, in the form of a soft key, on the PC's display screen, together with an indication that the consumer can, if desired, obtain information on the selling company, based on statistics derived from actual customers' experiences of the company, by actuating the soft key CCS icon.

If the consumer requires information on the selling company, he/she actuates the soft key CCS icon using, for example, an electronic mouse, after which a graphic diagram is automatically presented on the display screen of the consumer's PC. The graphic diagram presents, in an easily understandable manner, information concerning the selling company and, in particular, information concerning other system users' dealings with the selling company.

In particular, the information presented by the graphic diagram includes sales volumes for the selling company, together with a relative assessment of other system users' comments concerning their dealings with the selling company, and whether the selling company satisfied promises made in advertising and/or other promotional literature for the products and/or services offered to system users. The presented information may also include information concerning the manner in which consumer complaints have been handled by the selling company.

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The relative assessment of other system users' comments relates, inter alia, to whether:

- 5 - a final date for delivery of a product, or service,
- product functionality,
- product quality,
- 10 - product reliability, and
- after sales services

15 are consistent with that which was promised in the advertising and/or other promotional literature, at the time of purchase by system users. In other words, information concerning whether, or not, a selling company has lived up to its promises, as made in advertising/sales literature, or in any other way, when a product, or service, is being purchased from the company.

20 As stated above, the charges levied by the CCS operator for the provision of the CCS service are dependent upon the use made of the service by customers. For example, each time a customer actuates the soft key CCS icon to gain access to the CCS service, the billing system, referred to above, will be informed by the access monitor 6 and the selling company's
25 account will be automatically debited, and the CCS operator's account will be automatically credited, with an agreed monetary charge, i.e. each time a consumer gains access to the CCS service, when contemplating the purchase of a product, or service, from a selling company, the selling company receives a charge from the CCS operator. In order to prevent
30 highly popular sellers from being ruined by the CCS service, the charges

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levied per actuation of the soft key CCS icon, by a CCS operator, are successively reduced, as the access frequency increases, and disappear altogether when a predetermined maximum number of accesses has been reached over a specified period of time. In other words, after a
5 predetermined maximum number of accesses have been made, within the specified period of time, in respect of a selling company, no further charges are made to that company for additional accesses, within the specified period of time.

10 In operation, when a system user (consumer) gains access to a selling company's WWW site to make a purchase from the company, the customer care service of the present invention is adapted to automatically present, on the display screen of the system user's PC, the soft key CCS icon for actuation by the consumer if he/she wishes to take advantage of the
15 customer care service. At the same time, the system user (consumer) is requested to indicate, by actuating a soft key, i.e. a 'yes' box, displayed on the PC's display screen, whether the consumer is prepared to supply trading information to the CCS operator concerning his/her trading experiences with the selling company. In other words, by actuating the soft key 'yes' box, the
20 consumer accepts that the CCS operator may send an enquiry on how satisfied he/she is with the selling company's service. The consumer is informed that it takes very little time, for example, only 20 seconds, to complete the enquiry and that an enquiry is only sent to randomly selected consumers by the CCS operator.

25 The software of the CCS operator's file server 4 is adapted to automatically send enquiries to randomly selected consumers (purchasers) who have actuated the soft key 'yes' box. The responses to the enquiries are handled fully automatically by the CCS operator by using data collation
30 means which collate the information received from consumers, in response to

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the enquiries, and which use the collated information to formulate new statistics, i.e. updated information, on the selling companies for distribution to system users (consumers). In practice, the new statistics are sent to users of the CCS service with a parametrically controlled delay. For example, information distribution means provided by the CCS operator, are adapted to make updated information available to consumers (system users) every third hour.

The agreement between the CCS operator and each of the selling company specifies that the CCS operator must be sent a copy of all incoming complaints made by consumers (system users). This information is compared with information received from consumers and enables the CCS operator to check that a selling company is not bluffing and only transmitting information about some of its customers (perhaps those that are positively impressed). Furthermore, as a safety mechanism, the CCS operator also collects information in respect of complaints lodged with official bodies/authorities, for example, third party consumer protection organisations. If it appears that a selling company has not fulfilled its agreement with the CCS operator, the customer care service is adapted to automatically withdraw the service from the selling company, by removal of the soft key CCS logo from the selling company's WWW site display, i.e. the CCS operator will no longer offer the service to system users in respect of that selling company.

It will be seen from the foregoing that the customer care service, in terms of its basic functionality, is fully automated apart from the extra checks which are made for reasons of safety, with third party consumer protection organisations.

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CLAIMS

1. A system for collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, said system including, for connection to said electronic medium, a plurality of system user terminals, a service provider's file server, and a plurality of information provider's file servers, characterised in that said service provider's file server includes information collection and distribution means for:

- collecting information from:

- said plurality of information providers concerning services and/or information offered to system users; and

- system users relating to those of said plurality of information providers from whom services and/or information have been obtained by said system users; and

- collating collected information on an information provider and distributing information, based on said collated information, to system users, on request.

2. A system as claimed in claim 1, characterised in that said system is adapted to establish a data link between said service provider's file server and each of said plurality of information providers.

3. A system as claimed in claim 2, characterised in that said information collection and distribution means are adapted to automatically obtain, from said plurality of information providers, information concerning all aspects of the services and/or information provided to a system user, using said data

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link.

4. A system as claimed in claim 3, characterised in that information collected from said plurality of information providers includes data relating to the nature of the services and/or information provided to system users, and the system user's e-mail address.

5. A system as claimed in either claim 3, or claim 4, characterised in that said data link is provided over said electronic medium.

6. A system as claimed in any preceding claim, characterised in that said plurality of system user terminals each include a display screen, and in that said information collection and distribution means include presentation means for automatically indicating on the display screen of a system user's terminal, each time the system user accesses an information provider's file server, that information concerning other system users' dealings with said information provider can be obtained from the service provider.

7. A system as claimed in claim 6, characterised in that said presentation means are adapted, when giving said automatic indication, to request the system user to indicate, by actuating a soft key displayed on said display screen, whether the system user is prepared to supply information to said service provider concerning the system user's dealings with said information provider.

8. A system as claimed in claim 7, characterised in that said information collection and distribution means include:

- enquiry means for automatically sending enquiries to randomly selected system users who have actuated said soft key;

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- data collation means for:
 - collating information received from system users, in response to said enquiries; and
 - using the collated information to formulate information on said information providers for distribution to system users; and
- distribution means for distributing said information to system users with a parametrically controlled delay.

9. A system as claimed in claim 8, characterised in that said distribution means are adapted to make updates of said information available to system users every third hour.

10. A system as claimed in any of claims 3 to 9, characterised in that said information obtained from said information providers includes details of all complaints received from system users, and in that said information collection and distribution means include data comparison means for comparing said information provider's complaints information with complaints information received from system users.

11. A system as claimed in claim 10, characterised in that said comparison means are adapted to compare said information provider's complaints information with complaints information obtained from third party consumer protection organisations.

12. A system as claimed in claim 10, or claim 11, characterised in that, in the event that an information provider has failed to supply relevant information to said service provider, said information collection and

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distribution means are adapted to automatically cease:

- collecting information from that information provider; and
- 5 - supplying information on that information provider to system users.

13. A system as claimed in any of claims 6 to 12, characterised in that said information collection and distribution means are adapted to automatically display an icon on the display screen of a system user's terminal, when said
10 system user accesses an information provider's file server, said icon being a soft key for actuation by the system user when information concerning other system users' dealings with the information provider is required from said information provider.

14. A system as claimed in claim 13, characterised in that said information collection and distribution means are adapted, when said soft key icon is actuated by a system user, to automatically present, on the display screen of the system user's terminal, a graphic diagram of said information concerning
15 other system users' dealings with the information provider.

15. A system as claimed in claim 14, characterised in that said information provider is a company offering products and/or services for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, and in that the information presented by said graphic diagram includes sales volumes for the selling company, together with a relative assessment of said other system user's
25 comments concerning their dealings with said selling company, and whether said selling company satisfied promises made in advertising and/or other promotional literature for the products and/or services offered to system users.

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16. A system as claimed in claim 15, characterised in that the information presented by said graphic diagram further includes information concerning the manner in which system user complaints have been handled by the selling company.

17. A system as claimed in claim 15, or claim 16, characterised in that said relative assessment relates, inter alia, to whether a final date for delivery of a product, or service. product functionality, product quality, product reliability, and after sales services, are consistent with that which was promised in said advertising and/or other promotional literature, at the time of purchase by system users.

18. A system as claimed in any preceding claim, characterised in that said electronic medium is the Internet.

19. A system as claimed in claim 18, characterised in that said service provider and said information providers each have a WWW site located on a respective file server, and in that said information provider's WWW sites are accessible to system users wishing to acquire services and/or information from said information providers.

20. A system as claimed in claim 18, or claim 19, characterised in that each system user terminal includes a personal computer (PC), a modulator/demodulator (Modem) for connecting said PC to the Internet, and an Internet software package.

21. A system as claimed in any preceding claim, characterised in that said system includes a billing system for charging said information providers for the supply of said information on information providers to system users, said charges being made in dependence upon the use made of said information

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supply service by system users.

22. A system as claimed in claim 21, characterised in that said system includes an access monitor for:

- monitoring access, by system users, to said information supply service; and
- informing said billing means each time said information supply service is accessed for an information provider;

and in that said billing system is adapted, on receipt of information from said access monitor, to debit the information provider's account and credit the services provider's account, with an agreed monetary charge.

23. A system as claimed in claim 21, or claim 22, characterised in that the charges levied are successively reduced, as the access frequency increases, and in that, after a predetermined maximum number of accesses has been made, within a specified period of time, no further charge is levied for additional accesses within said specified period of time.

24. A system as claimed in any preceding claim, characterised in that each of said information providers is a company offering services and/or products for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, in that said information collection and distribution means are adapted to automatically offer a customer care service (CCS) to a system users, said CCS being electronically accessible to a system user, at the time of making a purchase, by way of the display screen of the system user's terminal, and in that said CCS is adapted, when accessed by a system user, to provide information on a selling company, said information being based on other

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system user's trading experiences with that selling company.

25. A system as claimed in claim 24, characterised in that said customer care service (CCS) is offered by said service provider in collaboration with said selling companies.

26. In a system for collecting and distributing information using an electronic medium, such as the Internet, in which said system includes, for connection to said electronic medium, a plurality of system user terminals, a service provider's file server, and a plurality of information provider's file servers, a method for collecting and distributing information characterised by:

- collecting information from:
 - said plurality of information providers concerning services and/or information offered to system users; and
 - system users relating to those of said plurality of information providers from whom services and/or information have been obtained by said system users; and
- collating collected information on an information provider and distributing information, based on said collated information, to system users, on request.

27. A method as claimed in claim 26, characterised by establishing a data link between said service provider's file server and each of said plurality of information providers.

28. A method as claimed in claim 27, characterised by automatically

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obtaining, from said plurality of information providers, information concerning all aspects of the services and/or information provided to a system user, using said data link.

5 29. A method as claimed in claim 28, characterised in that information collected from said plurality of information providers includes data relating to the nature of the services and/or information provided to system users, and the system user's e-mail address.

10 30. A method as claimed in claim 28, or claim 29, characterised in that said data link is provided over said electronic medium.

15 31. A method as claimed in any of claims 26 to 30, characterised by automatically indicating on a display screen of a system user's terminal, each time the system user accesses an information provider's file server, that information concerning other system users' dealings with said information provider can be obtained from the service provider.

20 32. A method as claimed in claim 31, characterised by requesting said system user to actuate a soft key displayed on said display screen to indicate said system user's willingness to supply information to said service provider concerning said system user's dealings with said information provider.

25 33. A method as claimed in claim 32, characterised by:

- automatically sending enquiries to randomly selected system users who have actuated said soft key;
 - collating information received from system users, in response to said enquiries;
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- using the collated information to formulate information on said information providers for distribution to system users; and
- 5 - distributing said information to system users with a parametrically controlled delay.

34. A method as claimed in claim 33, characterised by making updates of said information available to system users every third hour.

10 35. A method as claimed in any of claims 29 to 34, characterised in that said information obtained from said plurality of information providers includes details of all complaints received from system users, and in that said information collection and distribution means include data comparison means
15 for comparing said information provider's complaints information with complaints information received from system users.

20 36. A method as claimed in claim 35, characterised by comparing said information provider's complaints information with complaints information obtained from third party consumer protection organisations.

25 37. A method as claimed in claim 35, or claim 36, characterised in that, in the event that an information provider has failed to supply relevant information to said service provider, said method includes the steps of automatically ceasing the:

- collection of information from that information provider; and
- supply of information on that information provider to system users.

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38. A method as claimed in any of claims 31 to 37, characterised by:

- automatically displaying a soft key, in the form of an icon, on the display screen of a system user's terminal, when said system user accesses an information provider's file server; and
- said system user actuating said soft key icon, when information concerning other system users' dealings with the information provider, is required from said information provider.

39. A method as claimed in claim 38, characterised by automatically presenting, on the display screen of the system user's terminal, a graphic diagram of said information concerning other system users' dealings with the information provider, when said soft key icon is actuated by a system user.

40. A method as claimed in claim 39, characterised in that said information provider is a company offering products and/or services for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, and in that the information presented by said graphic diagram includes sales volumes for the selling company, together with a relative assessment of said other system user's comments concerning their dealings with said selling company, and whether said selling company satisfied promises made in advertising and/or other promotional literature for the products and/or services offered to system users.

41. A method as claimed in claim 40, characterised in that the information presented by said graphic diagram further includes information concerning the manner in which system user complaints have been handled by the selling company.

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42. A method as claimed in claim 40, or claim 41, characterised in that said relative assessment relates, inter alia, to whether a final date for delivery of a product, or service, product functionality, product quality, product reliability, and after sales services, are consistent with that which was promised in said advertising and/or other promotional literature, at the time of purchase by system users.

43. A method as claimed in any of claims 26 to 42, characterised in that said electronic medium is the Internet.

44. A method as claimed in claim 43, characterised in that said service provider and said information providers each have a WWW site located on a respective file server, and in that said information provider's WWW sites are accessible to system users wishing to acquire services and/or information from said information providers.

45. A method as claimed in claim 43, or claim 44, characterised in that each system user terminal includes a personal computer (PC), a modulator/demodulator (Modem) for connecting said PC to the Internet, and an Internet software package.

46. A method as claimed in any of claims 26 to 44, characterised by charging said information providers for the supply of said information on information providers to system users, said charges being made in dependence upon the use made of said information supply service by system users.

47. A method as claimed in claim 46, characterised by:

- monitoring access, by system users, to said information supply

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service;

- informing said billing means each time said information supply service is accessed for an information provider; and

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- on receipt of information from said access monitor, debiting the information provider's account and credit the services provider's account, with an agreed monetary charge.

10 48. A method as claimed in claim 46, or claim 47, characterised by:

- successively reducing the levied charges, as the access frequency increases, and

15 - after a predetermined maximum number of accesses has been made, within a specified period of time, making no further charge for additional accesses made within said specified period of time.

20 49. A method as claimed in any of claims 26 to 48, characterised in that each of said information providers is a company offering services and/or products for sale to system users (customers) via said electronic medium, and in that said method includes the steps of:

25 - automatically offering a customer care service (CCS) to a system user, at the time of making a purchase, by way of the display screen of the system user's terminal, and

30 - when said CCS is accessed by a system user, automatically providing information on a selling company, said information being based on other system user's trading experiences with that selling company.

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50. A method as claimed in claim 49, characterised in that said customer care service (CCS) is offered by said service provider in collaboration with said selling companies.

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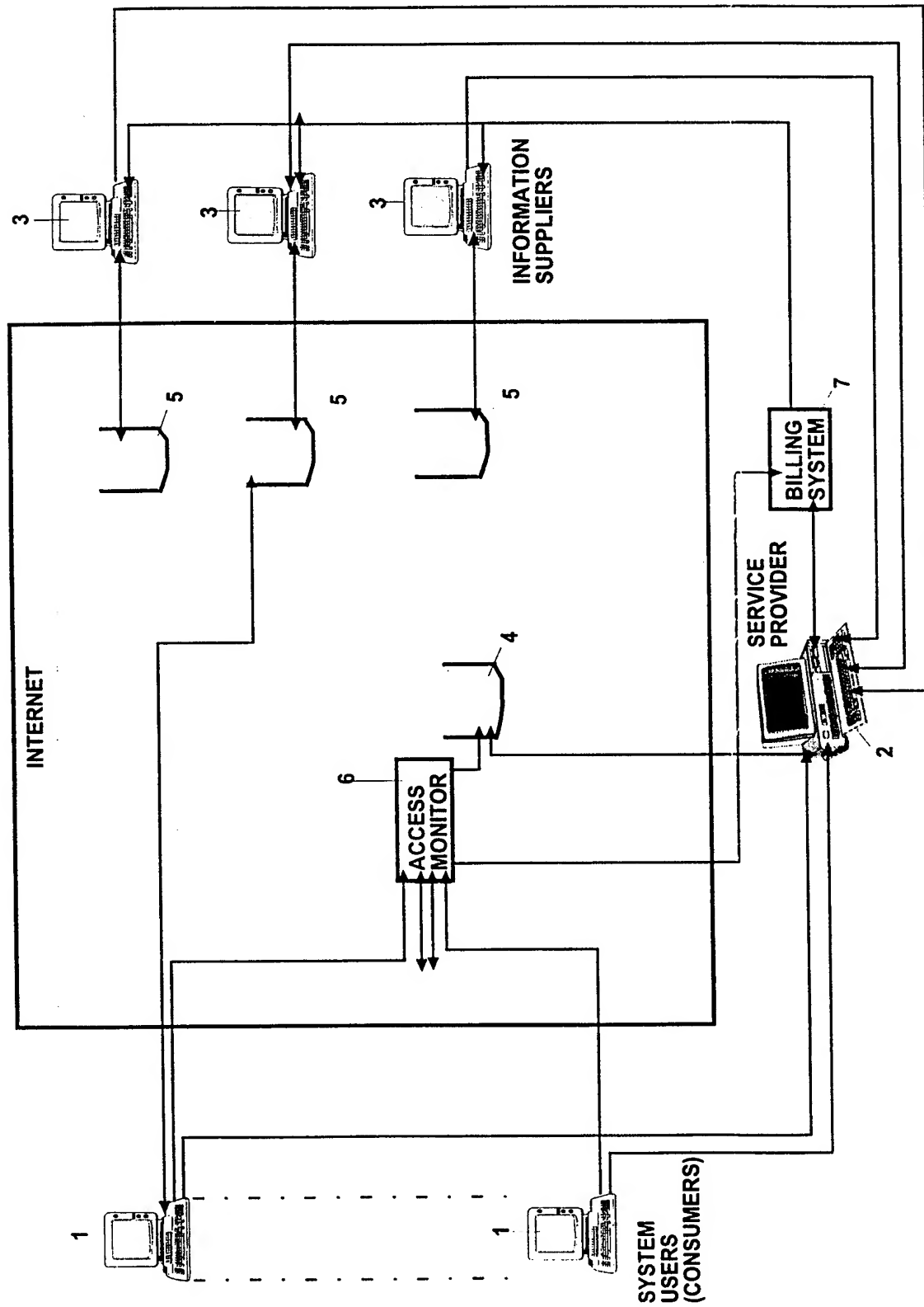


FIGURE 1

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/SE 98/01158

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC6: G06F 17/60, G06F 17/30

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

IPC6: G06F

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

SE,DK,FI,NO classes as above

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

WPI

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

| Category* | Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages | Relevant to claim No. |
|-----------|--|-----------------------|
| X | US 5592375 A (BARDWELL C. SALMON ET AL), 7 January 1997 (07.01.97) | 1,26 |
| A | -- ----- | 2-25,27-50 |

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. ☒ See patent family annex.

| | |
|---|--|
| * Special categories of cited documents: | "T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention |
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| "P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed | |

Date of the actual completion of the international search

23 November 1998

Date of mailing of the international search report

26-11-1998

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